## Region 7 - Southeast Montana

***Yellowstone River Paddlefish***

For the second year in a row, flows in the Yellowstone River have reached or exceeded the long-term average. Adequate flows in the Yellowstone system have been a rarity during the past decade and the tell-tail signs of drought have been manifest in the fish populations in the Yellowstone. The past two years of good flows have improved fish populations in general and have had a dramatic effect on paddlefish.

The increasing hydrograph found during May 2006 resulted in an exceptional run of paddlefish from their wintering areas in North Dakota's Sakakawea reservoir to their spawning areas upstream in the Yellowstone River.

The start of the paddlefish season found large numbers of young paddlefish bumping up against the Intake Diversion located about 75 miles upstream of the Yellowstone-Missouri River confluence. The season began with a high level of harvest and accelerated until the harvest cap was met a few days after the season opener.

Regulation changes during the 2006 paddlefish season included additional catch and release days in an attempt to spread out the harvest of these sought after fish over a longer period of time. The increased opportunity to catch and release a trophy sized fish appeared to be very popular with anglers especially when the harvest season ended early in the season.

The current population of paddlefish in the Yellowstone-Missouri River below Fort Peck reach is dominated by a year-class of fish that were spawned in 1995. A large component of the 2006 harvest consisted of these 11 year old males all in the 18-20 pound weight class. Research in North Dakota to determine spawning success and recruitment of juvenile fish to the paddlefish population indicates that there has not been a successful recruitment of young paddlefish since the highly successful 1995 spawn.

Recruitment from a fry stage to a fingerling that will survive its first winter is dependant upon abundant food and cover. Paddlefish eat zooplankton their entire lives but are extremely dependant upon good sources of these microscopic bugs in the early developmental stages from fry to fingerling. Biologists have found that the upper reservoir flats in Sakakawea Reservoir can produce the abundant zooplankton resources needed for positive recruitment of young fish if the reservoir is full or increasing in elevation. Reservoir elevations during the 10 years have done just the opposite. Declining reservoir levels have produced limited zooplankton resources resulting in very poor survival of paddlefish fry and thus very poor recruitment of new fish to the population.

So what does all of this mean to the paddlefish angler? Simply stated, if the Yellowstone ecosystem is not able to produce replacement fish for those that are harvested we are then harvesting our potential brood stock that will be needed to repopulate the system with paddlefish once reservoir levels return. There is much speculation and discussion about reservoir management, global warming, continued

drought and other factors that will contribute to the long-term impacts to this system. In the whirlwind of these discussions fish managers evaluate the processes that they can control, mainly impacts to the population by anglers.

Current regulations allow for the harvest of one paddlefish per licensed angler. The total allowable harvest is determined by a model that evaluates recruitment against harvest. In order to maintain a robust brood stock of adult paddlefish North Dakota and Montana have set the harvest cap at 1000 fish per state, or 2000 adult paddlefish being harvested from the Yellowstone-Lower Missouri River population. Rules to allow fish managers to close the season once that cap is met have been implemented and appear to be functioning as desired.

What does the future hold for the paddlefish population and our opportunity to continue to harvest this unique fish? Current stocks of adult paddlefish are strong so the availability of spawning aged adults is adequate to sustain the population far into the future. The ability to recruit paddlefish fry to the adult population is a direct affect of reservoir levels, which do not appear to be improving in the near future. The future of this population will be determined by the ability to manage the harvest of this unique fish. Fish managers are confident in the data collected on paddlefish population status and in the tools available to manage harvest of these fish into the future. But, anglers may see a reduction in the harvest cap in the future if recruitment of young fish does not improve.

The management of paddlefish will continue to be a dynamic and changing process far into the future. The conservation of this unique fish combined with the continued ability for anglers to catch and harvest a paddlefish remains the goal of FWP fish managers.

***Other Yellowstone River Fishing Opportunities***

The lower Yellowstone River continues to provide exceptional angling for a variety of fish species. The 2006 angling season proved to be memorable on the lower Yellowstone River.

Smallmouth bass abundance continues to increase in specific habitats along the reach of river running from Hysham to Miles City. Early summer catches of these hard-fighting fish thrilled anglers. Smallmouth bass are found in areas of the river where they can find forage fish. Target riffle/pool habitats where bass lie in wait for unsuspecting minnows to drift from riffles into the pools where they become an easy lunch. Use lures that mimic the minnows that bass are foraging on for best results.

Channel catfish numbers and sizes both increased during 2006. Early season fishing for catfish resulted in many fish in the 6-10 pound range. Very abundant were younger catfish in the 2-4 pound range. Standard catfishing methods and baits worked well to catch catfish the entire length of the lower Yellowstone system. In addition to the traditional night-crawler rig, crankbaits tossed along the river's edge produced nice catfish from pocket habitats. Many of the larger catfish focused on the same forage minnows that smallmouth bass were pursuing and could be caught with the same lures.

Other game fish species such as sauger, walleye, and shovelnose sturgeon were pursued with good success during the 2006 season but were caught seasonally. Sauger and shovelnose sturgeon are abundant in the lower Yellowstone during the spring and fall periods.

Fishing the lower Yellowstone River can be exceptional if conditions are correct. Spring run-off creates muddy water, which shuts down angling success. Once the river clears in late June fishing improves dramatically until late July or August when algae growth in the Yellowstone limits the ability to fish due to fouled lines and lures. By late fall the algae decreases and the ability to cast lures returns.

***Tongue River***

Fishing opportunities in the Tongue River are abundant but access is very limited. Along the 184 mile reach of river that extends from the Tongue River Reservoir to the confluence with the Yellowstone River anglers can encounter a variety of fishing opportunities. Rainbow trout and smallmouth bass can be found in the tail-race waters below the reservoir. Both species will succumb to fly or lure.

The majority of the Tongue River from the dam to the confluence with the Yellowstone contains smallmouth bass and channel catfish inhabiting pool habitats. Angling for these fish on a scenic, prairie river is a unique and solitary experience. Public access to the Tongue River is very limited but the local landowners are friendly and allow fishing access when approached.

Of great importance to the Tongue River fishery is the development of a fish passage channel around the T&Y (Tongue and Yellowstone) Diversion located about 20 miles up-stream from the mouth of the Tongue River.

A cooperative effort spearheaded by Roger Muggli, of the T&Y Irrigation District and many State and Federal agencies resulted in the opening of a fish by-pass channel around the T&Y Diversion. The completed fish by-pass will be in operation spring of 2008 allowing fish from the Yellowstone River to access upstream reaches of the Tongue. In all, an additional 45 miles of river will be accessible to fish from the Yellowstone River for spawning.

Moving further up the Tongue River is the SH Diversion dam. This dam is scheduled for removal sometime in 2009. With the removal of these low-head dams fish will have unimpeded access to over 100 miles of river that has been inaccessible for the past century. The restoration of, and access to, spawning and nursery habitats should prove to be very beneficial to fish populations in both the Yellowstone and Tongue Rivers.

***Tongue River Reservoir***

Crappie fishing at the Tongue River Reservoir could be described as average this past season. The crappie population remains strong with many fish in the 8-10" age class. An abundant 6-8" age class is found in the reservoir and should produce many limits of quality sized fish in 2007.

Bullhead catfish remain very abundant in the reservoir. The reservoir drawdown of 1997-1999 associated with dam reconstruction, provided conditions that were very suitable to bullhead spawning and recruitment success. These fish are now in the 1-2 lb range and make for a great evening along the shore with a simple hook and worm rig. Bullhead catfish produce a great fillet and are exceptional eating.

Reservoir elevations and the duration of high water in the system have a large impact on the spawning and recruitment success of many species in the Tongue River Reservoir. In recent years these conditions have been very favorable for northern pike. The fishery contains at least two strong year classes of the fish, some of which are reaching lengths of 30". These fish put up a good fight and are quite a surprise to anglers focused on catching crappie.

Other fish species of interest in the reservoir include smallmouth bass, channel catfish, and walleye. Both of these species seem to be doing well in the system and are increasing in abundance. Since the reconstruction of the dam and refilling of the system in 2000, walleye numbers have been lower than desired in both angler creels and biologist's surveys. Results from the 2005 and 2006 netting surveys show moderately increasing walleye numbers in the reservoir. Continued stocking of fingerling and fry walleye combined with favorable reservoir elevations will hopefully keep this fish on the increase.

***Prairie Ponds***

For two years in a row prairie ponds in SE Montana have seen good water levels. Basic to producing good fish populations in these small, obscure systems is adequate and timely rainstorms. Precipitation events in spring of 2006 recharged many of these ponds allowing for rapid growth in stocked rainbow trout or resident largemouth bass populations. Once drained by drought, these systems sometimes take a few years to re-charge ground moisture before the pond will remain full.

Ponds that retained water through the summer of 2006 were stocked with fish and have been extremely productive. Phenomenal growth can be experienced by fish stocked into these highly productive systems.

Continued precipitation events are needed to retain prairie pond fisheries. Those ponds that receive spring rains and maintain full pools should produce good fishing the next season.

The regional fisheries staff monitors approximately 35 of these prairie pond systems each year. Results of these efforts can be found in our annual pond booklet. This booklet is free to the public and can be obtained by contacting the Region 7 office. The booklet provides results of the most recent surveys and maps to locate the ponds. Many of the ponds listed in this booklet are on private lands. Please obtain landowner permission before fishing these ponds.